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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the association between the nature of parent-caregiver relationships and child behavior and examined the parent-caregiver relationship as a social support. A total of 120 parents of 2-year-olds who used child care at least 20 hours a week were randomly selected. Participants were asked to complete a survey that included a demographic questionnaire, measures of child behavior problems, and questions concerning support from family, friends, and caregivers. A total of 97 parents responded. Twenty parent-caregiver pairs that represented extreme positions regarding support from caregivers were subsequently interviewed in depth. Content analysis of interview data revealed four profiles of parent-caregiver relationships: custodial, business and professional, friend, and family relationships. These categories are defined and discussed. It was found that the toddlers in the sample, most of whom entered child care before 6 months of age, averaged fewer behavioral and emotional problems than toddlers in the normative sample. Caregiver support may be associated with child behavior and variations in child behavior may be related to different types and sources of social support. The relevance of the findings to the ecological model of development-in-context is noted. (RH)

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THE ECOLOGY OF CHILD CARE:

THE RELATIONSHIP OF PARENT-CAREGIVER SUPPORT AND CHILD CARE QUALITY TO TODDLER BEHAVIOR

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THE ECOLOGY OF CHILD CARE: THE RELATIONSHIP OF PARENT-CAREGIVER SUPPORT AND CHILD CARE QUALITY TO TODDLER BEHAVIOR

This study, based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, investigated the association between the nature of parent-caregiver relationships and child behavior, and examined the parent-caregiver relationship phenomenologically as a social support.

Bronfenbrenner proposed that the interface between child care and the family be conceptualized as a unique variable, and hypothesized that to the extent a supportive link existed between the child's primary settings of home and child care, development was enhanced. Indeed, popular notion in the child development field has been that parents should maintain close ties with child care providers, and that child care should serve as a social support. However, empirical data to support the importance of this relationship is lacking. Again, the purpose of the present study was to examine relationships between parents and caregivers to discover whether there was any association between the nature of these relationships and the behavior of the child.

Thus, the parent-caregiver relationship was the focus of the present investigation, in particular, the supportiveness of this relationship as perceived by the parent. Vaux's conceptualization of social support as a meta-construct was incorporated. Thus, social support was seen as comprised of FEELINGS, or one's subjective appraisal of the supportiveness of relationships; BEHAVIORS, or the actual supportive acts performed by others, including emotional support, socializing, practical assistance, financial/material assistance, and advice/guidance; and RESOURCES, including properties of one's supportive network such as structure, composition, and relationship quality.

Newspaper birth announcements in four medium-sized cities in Connecticut were used to randomly select 120 parents of two-year-olds. Parents, who used child care at least 20 hours a week for their toddler, were asked to complete a 10-page mail survey which included a demographic questionnaire and measures of child behavior problems, support from family and friends, and support from caregivers. Ninety-seven parents responded, for a response rate of 81%. Later, 20 parent-caregiver pairs, representing extreme groups based on reported support from caregivers, were interviewed in depth.

Research questions were as follows:

1. Is the frequency of toddler behavior problems reported by parents related to the supportiveness of parent-caregiver relationships, taking into account family status and child care quality?
2. Is the frequency of toddler behavior problems reported by parents related to the supportiveness of the kin and friendship context in which parent-caregiver relationships exist?
3. What do the relationships between parents and caregivers look like?

After a brief description of sample characteristics, I will address each research question separately.

Most of the surveys were completed by mothers. Mothers' average age was 32 years and fathers' average age was 34. 89% of families were intact. Toddlers ranged from 25 to 32 months of age, just over half were only children, and approximately half were female.

Half of mothers and 43% of fathers had completed college. Nearly all parents were employed full-time. Average annual income was approximately $55,000 for this sample.

Over half of toddlers were in child care by five months of age and nearly 70% had started child care by six months. About 60% of child care took place in family-style settings, 21% was provided by a relative of the child, usually a grandparent, and 17% of care was center-based. The average number of hours of care per week was 34.

Now I will discuss the methods and results for each of the three research questions.

The first research question was: IS THE FREQUENCY OF TODDLER BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS REPORTED BY PARENTS RELATED TO THE SUPPORTIVENESS OF THE PARENT-CAREGIVER RELATIONSHIP, TAKING INTO ACCOUNT FAMILY STATUS AND QUALITY OF CHILD CARE?

Data were gathered using a mail survey. Achenbach's Child Behavior Checklist was used to measure toddler behavior problems and Total scores and scores on Internalizing and Externalizing broad-band groupings were used in the analysis. The supportiveness of the parent-caregiver relationship was operationalized using measures developed from existing scales for support appraisals and supportive acts. Each of these measures demonstrated good psychometric properties for the study sample.

The Hollingshead index was used as a measure of family status. An index for child care quality was computed from structural variables including adult/child ratio, group size, and caregiver education and experience.

Frequency of behavioral/emotional problems was related minimally but significantly to family status. There was a small but significant association between scores on Internalizing and Externalizing behavior scales and reported caregiver support, and for Internalizing scores this association remained significant after controlling for family status. Child care quality, although significantly related to caregiver support, was not related to child behavior for the present sample. No differences in child behavior were evident between boys and girls or across center, family day care, and relative care settings.

The second research question was: IS THE FREQUENCE OF BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS REPORTED BY PARENTS RELATED TO THE SUPPORTIVENESS OF THE KIN AND FRIENDSHIP CONTEXT IN WHICH THE PARENT-CAREGIVER RELATIONSHIP EXISTS?

Again, data were gathered using a mail survey. Again, The CBCL was

used to measure behavior problems and, additionally, Vaux's scales for measuring perceived support and supportive acts were used to measure family and friend support.

Frequency of reported behavioral/emotional problems was not related to the degree of general social support reported by parents. The present sample of parents reported relatively high support from extended family, which may have limited correlational findings. A relationship did emerge between Externalizing behavior and support from friends, but this relationship was nonsignificant once family status was controlled.

The third research question was: WHAT DOES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS LOOK LIKE?

Based on extreme scores on multiple measures of caregiver support, 10 high support and 10 low support subjects were selected for face-to-face interviews. Interviews were semi-structures. Content analysis of interview data revealed four profiles of parent-caregiver relationships reflecting varying degrees of scope, intensity, and stability. These four characterizations were labeled and defined as follows:

> The CUSTODIAL RELATIONSHIP might be described as one in which the caregiver is primarily a sitter and simply provides supervision, and usually stimulation, for the child. There is little meaningful interaction with the parent and the parent may even be directive in any exchange.
>
> The BUSINESS/PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP might be described as one in which the caregiver is child-oriented and otherwise cordial with the parent. There are clear boundaries regarding what is appropriate interaction between caregiver and parent. While either the parent or caregiver may express a desire to know more about the other, there is a general reluctance to get involved.
>
> The FRIEND RELATIONSHIP might be described as one in which the caregiver and parent do not restrict their interaction to a focus on the child and see each other in roles that do not include the child.
>
> The FAMILY RELATIONSHIP might be described as one in which both caregiver and parent share a mutual investment in the long term well-being of the child. The caregiver also has an investment in the well-being of the parent.

Parents with lower scores on the three caregiver scales were more likely to describe their relationships as custodial or business/professional. Parents with higher scores on the three caregiver support scales were more likely to describe relationships as friend or family. Caregivers, in separate telephone interviews, offered relationship descriptions congruent with those given by parents. Day care centers accounted for most of the custodial and more than half of the business/professional relationships and family day care homes were split between business and friend relationships.

Quotes from parents included the following: To describe a relationship labeled as CUSTODIAL one parent said:

> When I thought about my relationship with my child's caregiver I realized I didn't know her. They have a lot of turnover. I thought, if I don't know them, what is it like for my kids?

and a caregiver offered:

> We never really sat down and had a real long talk. When you babysit, parents tell you what to do. Here it is different. You don't see the parents...I shy away from talking with parents. I'm afraid to say something that might get them mad. They might think their child is unhappy here.

To describe a relationship labeled as BUSINESS/PROFESSIONAL, the following comment was made by a parent:

> Friendly, open, child-oriented. She gives me information when I ask.

and a caregiver said:

> We are cordial with each other...I like to think that we're partners. That's the idea...none of the relationships are social.

To describe a relationship labeled as FRIEND, a parent said:

> Very good friends. Our husbands socialize. We socialize with and without our families.

and one caregiver said:

> Right now we're all friends. Some people like to keep it to business. They don't want to get involved... some of them I see after hours. I like to think that we're friends.

To describe a relationship labeled as FAMILY, parents spoke of both a close relationship and a sense of assuredness:

> We have a close relationship. Not so much parent-child now but more friends. We relate well. She would do anything for me.

and

> I wouldn't work otherwise. I know he's being taken care of the best.

and a caregiver offered the following comment:

> Our relationship is excellent. I find out what she wants and I do it. If she asks I tell her what I would do and then she uses her judgement. She's an excellent mother. She's got a lot going for her. We have an open relationship...she's taught me a lot.

Additional data from interviews indicated that, based on an assessment of social support network properties such as network size, support satisfaction, frequency of contact with network members, relationship closeness, relationship reciprocity, relationship complexity, and network density, the kin and friendship resources for low and high caregiver support groups were statistically similar. Interview data clearly confirmed findings of psychometric scales.

Other themes to emerge from interviews and discussed in the full research report related to family support systems, resources used specifically for parenting support, and negotiating work/family roles.

I will close by listing what I feel have been the three major findings of the present study:

1. That toddlers in this sample, most of whom entered child care before six months of age and receive at least twenty hours of nonparental care per week, averaged fewer behavioral/emotional problems than the normative sample;
2. The possibilities that caregiver support is associated with child behavior and that variations in child behavior may be related to different types and sources of social support; and
3. The relevance of findings to the ecological model of development-in-context by its demonstration of an empirical link at the mesosystem level.

Replication of the study in a low-resource or highly transient area would contribute to further testing of these ecological assumptions. Clearly, further research is needed to disentangle directionality, differential patterns of association, and application of findings beyond the domains and subjects of the present study.

Thank you.

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